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GEORGE FREDERICK WATTS.

OF all the artists who have striven to justify the ways of God to man, George Frederick Watts is perhaps the greatest and the most successful. The task that he undertook is a hard one at times, when the rod falls heavy upon the innocent back, and when the wronged soul seems to cry in vain for justice. It would be foolish to say that Watts has answered the riddle that the sphinx is forever forcing upon us; but he has made a response of such nobility that it has cheered thousands in his own day, and will cheer thousands yet unborn. No one who enters the great room in the Tate Gallery where his masterpieces hang leaves it without feeling uplifted to a higher and serener sphere.

Watts was one of the greatest of the stoics that have lived since Marcus Aurelius. In modern days we have lost the true meaning of the word stoic. It now conveys to the popular mind a mere stolid endurance of pain such as the American Indian displayed when tortured by his captors. But the true stoicism, the stoicism of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, was something entirely different. With them fortitude under affliction was a mere incident. Their bodies and minds were not hardened to pain. They had such faith in an all-ruling Divinity who was ordering everything for the best, they had such confidence that sickness and sorrow were but passing evils incident to the working out of a great and beneficent plan, that they felt themselves lifted above the reach of suffering. They dwelt on the mountain tops in the eternal serenity of the sun and stars, turning their eyes away from the storms beneath. Into this proud company Watts has entered; and if kindred spirits meet beyond the grave, he is now in high converse with the best of the emperors and the slave who was his master.

Watts was a man intensely religious, with a firm faith in the existence of a great Power that rules the universe for good, and which will draw peace and righteousness out of the turmoil and

sorrow of our mortal life. But he subscribed to no creed. His religious principle is that which lies at the root of every faith, and the lessons that his pictures teach will appeal equally to Christian and Buddhist, to Moslem and Jew. He tells us that God is just and merciful, that evil is but a temporary manifestation which works for good in the end. It has been well said that he alone of artists could have fittingly decorated the hall in which the Parliament of Religions was held at the Chicago Exposition. He alone could have uttered a message that would have been welcomed by every faith; which would have exalted all and offended none.

He is the painter of life's two supreme mysteries, love and death: this groping of kindred souls seeking one another in the darkness, which men call Love; this passing into the shuddering void, which men call Death. And he conceives of both in a noble, uplifting way that brings peace to tortured hearts. Love with him is not the mischievous urchin of Anacreon, nor even the beautiful youth who wooed Psyche in Apuleius's immortal tale. He is the beneficent spirit that binds heart to heart, the soul of the mother who looks into the smiling face of her babe, of the father who shows his son the upward path, of the brother who sustains the sister's faltering steps, of the friend who lays down his life for his friend, of the youth and maid who see heaven reflected in one another's eyes, of the husband and wife who, strong in one another's affection, go down hand in hand into the shadows. It is the universal principle that binds heart to heart, and manifests itself in kind deeds and loving words that bring hope and encouragement and joy.

And Death does not appear to him as a skeleton with a scythe. It comes as a gentle mother, bringing rest to the weary, peace to the eyes that are wet with tears. It comes as a sad but beneficent deity, sorrowful but comforting, as gentle as inexorable.

In all the long catalogue of his pictures, it is likely that the "Love and Life" and the "Love and Death" will remain the most popular and the most typical. Few pictures have been painted of greater dignity and beauty or nobler moral import. That strong, kind, manly love, guiding life's feeble, trusting

footsteps over the rocks up the steep mountain summit to the eternal day; that little feeble love that strives so desperately to drive back from the beloved door the great resistless Death that comes with no ungentle purpose—these are contributions to the world's art which will never be suffered to fall into oblivion, and which will be repeated in countless copies when the originals, which were painted for eternity, shall have crumbled into dust. They appeal alike to all men of all nations and of every faith, and they will carry down the ages a message of peace and comfort to sorrowing souls.

Watts is a painter of ideas, but he is not a painter of mere allegories. The genius of a Rubens may make a conventional allegory a thing of beauty; but in lesser hands they are apt to remain frigid and lifeless. The beings that Watts paints are alive. They are no cold abstractions. They carry with them the same conviction of vitality that we find in the fauns and tritons of Arnold Böcklin. They have the mystery, the unfathomed depths of the things that live.

Take that "Hope" which is so strangely like Despair, sitting upon the world with bowed head and bandaged eyes, holding the lyre with broken strings. We know not what she means, nor why she is called Hope; but she haunts our dreams like the figures that rest upon the Medicean tombs; a beauty and a mystery forever.

Watts possesses the rarest of artistic gifts, the power to realize the ideal. There are many who can reproduce the real with photographic accuracy. There are many who can paint dreams with dreamlike ineffectiveness. But there are few indeed whose visions assume the reality of truth and who can present them in a convincing manner. To this small number belongs the great artist who has left us.

It was his intention to embody eternal truths in forms that would be comprehended by all men in all ages, and which would require no interpretation. In this he failed, for he attempted the impossible. Even for his contemporaries an interpreter is essential. Few would guess unaided that the strong youth leading the slender, trusting maiden up the steep mountain was Love, or that his frail companion was Life; still fewer would

guess that the powerful woman whose aspect is so benignant yet so firm as she forces the door that the child vainly guards is intended for Death. But when the pictures are explained to us, they convey a noble lesson and one that appeals to the hearts of all men. A universal and self-explanatory symbolism appears to be beyond human achievement; but it is much to have invented symbols that are readily understood when interpreted and which give a vital and tangible form to noble conceptions.

In his art Watts was as essentially a preacher as Fra Angelico. But it is not simple faith in revealed religion that he preaches. He deals in great ethical principles of universal application. His art is no more Christian than Buddhist, no more Hebraic than Mohammedan. His ethical pictures are worthy to be hung in any temple, and no religion could repudiate them without cutting itself off from the principles that should always control human conduct.

And he had that absolute confidence in his mission that is the fundamental trait of all great preachers. Personally modest and unassuming, he took no pride in the technical value of his works; but of their ethical importance he had no doubt. From the first he offered his pictures to the nation with the full conviction that they were a fitting gift for a great people, and that they would have an uplifting influence on national life. Self-confidence of this sort, based not on vainglory but on a full belief that the Eternal is using one as a mouthpiece, incomprehensible as it is to the smiling Voltairian, has in it something of the sublime. That is the kind of faith that moves mountains.

And he who can review Watts's achievement without feeling that this self-confidence was well placed is indeed to be pitied. He who can look at the "Court of Death," where the king and the knight, the bride and the old woman, the child and the cripple, find peace and rest; at the noble form of the "Dead Warrior" with its inscription, "What I spent, I had; what I kept, I lost; what I gave, I have;" at "Conscience, the Dweller in the Innermost," with those awful eyes that seem to search the soul; at the bestial "Mammon," crushing God's most perfect

handiwork, the youth and the maid ready, but for Mammon's power, to do great and beautiful things; at "Death Crowning Innocence," the benign figure of the tender angel folding the little one lovingly to her heart in the sleep that knows no waking; at the "Time, Death, and Judgment," Time marching so inexorably onward arm in arm with the sweet and gentle Death, while the Judgment follows so fast and so surely after—the man who can look at these with no responsive thrill, with no uplifting of the soul, is of the earth earthy.

Because he is a preacher of universal truths Watts is primarily a painter of the nude. He deals with men and women as they appear before God and Nature. Clothing is local and transitory. The vestments of to-day are antiquated to-morrow; those that seem the perfection of grace and dignity in one country strike the inhabitants of another as absurd. But the human form is ever and everywhere the same, and the standards of its strength and beauty vary but little with longitude or time. And where Watts clothes his figures, he clothes them in the draperies of the Elgin marbles, which appeal to the eternal and universal sense of fitness.

But Watts was not merely a preacher. Half of his pictures have no ethical purport, and are painted solely because he loves beauty for itself. In these there is a truly Venetian delight in rounded limbs and voluptuous contours. These pictures are splendidly pagan, adoring beauty for its own sake, and lingering over the perfect human body as its highest manifestation. The spirit that animates them is the spirit of Titian and Giorgione, of Tintoretto in the "Marriage of Bacchus and Ariadne," of Paul Veronese in the "Triumph of Venice." Such pictures are the "Diana and Endymion," the "Fata Morgana," the "Arcadia," the "Eve Tempted" and the "Eve Repentant," the "Orpheus and Eurydice," the "Boyhood of Jupiter," the "Ariadne." Had Watts pursued only this line, he would have been one of the most delightful of modern painters; and it is because he had the disposition and the power to evoke these visions of sensuous beauty that his ethical works possess such vitality and truth.

Like all vigorous and original artists, Watts fell into errors

and made some conspicuous failures. The "pittori senz'errori" are doomed to mediocrity; sometimes a splendid mediocrity like that of Andrea del Sarto, but mediocrity still. Watts was not one of those who dwell contented and secure upon the plains. He sought to reach the summits, and, stumbling and falling, he mounted still. If it be true that "not failure, but low aim, is crime," he was guiltless indeed. He strove ever for the ideal, and that he attained it so often marks him as a master of his craft.

Watts belonged to no school. He was not a mediævalist, like Burne-Jones; he was not a classicist, like Lord Leighton. He had no predecessor, and he has left no followers. In his art he stood strangely alone, and he remained singularly insensible to the art movements that seethed around him. He was born into the old, dull, historical school, but he turned his back upon it. Holman Hunt, Rossetti, and the other Pre-Raphaelites gave a new life to English painting, but they moved him not. Lord Leighton, Alma-Tadema, and the neo-pagans ruled the hour, but they had no influence on Watts. Whistler and the impressionists passed by, but he painted on, caring nothing for their symphonies and nocturnes. From youth to age he pursued his own path, unaltered by surrounding influences, and yet no hermit, but a man keenly alive to all the intellectual movements of his time. In Michael Angelo alone can we find such independence, a life so consecrated in itself. He lived in the great throbbing heart of the world, with all the noise and tumult of London in his ears, awake to all that was going on about him, yet pursued his own way as serenely as if in the wilderness. He lived his own spiritual life apart, always simple in manner and sincere in inspiration, dwelling calmly upon the heights.

He was strangely indifferent to criticism. The war raged about his pictures, some proclaiming them daubs, others declaring them to be divine masterpieces; but he went unmoved upon his way, and if he cared for the world's praise or blame no one ever knew it. Certainly his work showed no trace of the critic's influence, remaining perfectly individual to the end.

He was like Michael Angelo in realizing that not the face

alone is expressive, but every muscle of the body; and to show his mastery over the body's expression he delighted in painting pictures where the face was turned away, and where only the attitude bespoke the feelings. Such is the Death in the picture of "Love and Death." Her back is turned to us; we see no part of her countenance; but her gesture is so full of protecting kindness that we need nothing more to assure us that she is a benignant deity as loving as she is mighty. So of the young man in the picture "For He Had Great Possessions." His face is averted; but his walk is so full of dejection that we realize perfectly the hopeless struggle going on within him between his yearning for salvation and his inability to part with the riches that bar his road to heaven. And in the "Eve Repentant" we see in the magnificent form of the fallen mother of mankind all the agony of the expulsion.

And yet we have said nothing about what are perhaps the greatest of his works—his portraits. They may not be the finest portraits ever painted, but they are certainly among the most remarkable. They are not mere presentments of the outer form; they are revelations of the man within. Perhaps his sitters did not look like this; but if that be so, it is their own fault. He has painted them as they should be. He has taken the great men of his time in England, and he has given us portraits in which we read all the strivings of their souls, all the achievements of their lives. In point of fact Nature no doubt covered the spirit with a less transparent vesture of clay; no doubt she etched the man's doings less clearly on his face. No doubt the pictures are true rather to the inner than to the outer man. It is almost impossible that the strain of the intellect and the striving of the soul should have wrought out such a face as that awful portrait of Cardinal Manning, where all the intensity of faith, all the intellectual energy, the inflexible purpose, and the unfathomed mysteries of the Catholic Church are forever concentrated; a face that haunts us like a vision, and which, once seen, is never forgotten. It is not likely that Lord Tennyson was in his outward aspect so thoroughly the ideal poet, living so entirely apart in the world of dreams. It is improbable that any of Watts's sitters wore their hearts

so completely on their sleeves. But his portraits are priceless interpretations of England's leading men, telling us more of their inner lives than many pages of writing and shedding a penetrating ray on contemporary history.

They are like that wonderful bust of Julius Cæsar in the British Museum, easily the greatest portrait bust that was ever made. Cæsar may not have looked like this, so refined, so intellectual, so resolute, so remorseless, such a wonderful combination of the scholar, the gentleman, and the beast of prey; but if he did not look thus, Nature blundered in the outer man. This gives us the true Cæsar, and in its lineaments we read the fate of Rome.

It is pleasing to think that, unlike so many great artists, Watts was successful from the first. He was spared the years of neglect and scorn that usually await the youth who would seek the favor of the Muses. His genius met with an early recognition, and in his old age he had "honor, love, obedience, troops of friends." Born in 1817, and dying only this year, he spanned almost a century, and died knowing that he had been a strength and an inspiration to thousands of his fellow-men.

Like Michael Angelo, Watts cared only for man. He painted no landscapes that we have seen save one view of barren mountain summits. The human soul, with its hopes and fears, its aspiration and its despair, its love and hate; the human body, so beautiful and so expressive, sufficed to convey his entire message. And he had much else in common with the great Florentine: earnestness, solemnity, a lofty soul that walked alone and sought no companionship, tireless industry that made length of days fruitful in enduring works, independence of external influences, a continual striving after the ideal.

But there were also great differences. Michael Angelo was an intense Christian of the type of Savonarola, finding his inspiration rather in the Psalms and the Hebrew prophets than in the Gospels; Watts was equally devout, but his religion knew no creed and personified no god. Michael Angelo is the essence of striving, and his troubled spirit knows no rest; Watts has the serenity of a Grecian sage. Michael Angelo is not a moralist, save as strength and beauty are moral in themselves; Watts

is consciously and intentionally didactic. Michael Angelo was a draughtsman, while Watts was a colorist. But with all their differences, there is much in common between them, and he who loves the one is not apt to be blind to the other's worth.

In considering the rank of an artist there are two things to weigh—his message, and the way he conveys it. Of these the latter is the more important, for without the "prehensile eye" and the skillful finger there can be no art. So essential are they that a man may be a very great artist, though, like Whistler, he has no message to his fellow-men save that light is beautiful and shadows not less alluring. But when, as in the case of Leonardo, Michael Angelo, Raphael, and Albert Dürer, the cunning hand and the seizing eye are combined with an intellect that thinks great thoughts and dwells aloft above the common herd, we have art's supreme manifestation, and the message which the artist utters goes thundering or singing down the ages.

According to Parisian standards, Watts's art education was sadly neglected. He was a pupil in the royal academy when its teaching was at the lowest ebb that it ever reached, when it was a factory of lifeless historical pictures painted in bitumen; and he wisely forsook its halls, and spent his time before the Elgin marbles, which to the end of his days he declared to be his real masters; and when later he was sent to Rome, he spent his time in the galleries, not copying, but absorbing. He worked out his own salvation in his own way, taking as his teachers the great men of the past, not the living masters of the hour. He thus acquired a technic that was singularly original and that was fitted to expressing his thoughts as none other could have been. It is not a technic that should be taught in the schools, for it is not suited to other men; but it suited him, just as Wagner's style of orchestration, which is so often offensive in his imitators, was the perfect mode of expressing the vast thoughts and Titanic passions of the greatest of composers.

Watts was not an accomplished draughtsman in the Florentine style. Like the Venetian, he drew with his brush. He modeled, dealing in rounded surfaces rather than in outlines.

And this he did well; not with the quick, sure hand of a Titian or a Rubens, but with patient labor till the end was achieved. He could not, with the stroke of a brush, make the flesh quiver and shine like the great Venetians or the mighty Fleming; but he had that infinite capacity for taking pains that characterizes genius, and when he got through with a picture his forms were vital and substantial. Yet none could call him a great draughtsman.

Because he modeled rather than drew, his work is usually spoken of as Venetian in its character; but nothing could be farther apart than the splendid fusing and blending of Venetian coloring and Watts's laborious stippling. Yet Watts was the most original and one of the greatest of modern colorists.

He was not the inventor of stippling. He was not the first to see that the play of light on small contiguous points of contrasting color would blend them in rich harmonies—harmonies in some respects more splendid than if the pigments themselves were fused on the palette; but he was the only great artist to adopt that as a system, and no one else has ever used it to such advantage. Nor was there any other system that would have suited his purpose so well. Titian and Rubens understood the art of blending colors and yet rendering them enduring, but the moderns have most often sadly failed. Witness Sir Joshua Reynolds, Delacroix, and Hans Makart. In their time they were proclaimed the equals of the great Venetians or of Rubens; but their works have now so faded and blackened and have grown so opaque that those who admire their color do so merely in obedience to tradition. Their fusions were made by the abuse of oil and bitumen, and time has had its revenge.

Watts painted not merely for his own generation, but primarily for future ages; and these points of color put on substantially dry promise to be the most enduring of all media. There is no reason why they should ever darken or change, and the pictures of Watts should be fresh and glowing when those of most of his contemporaries have become mere blotches of scaling paint.

It is this supreme mastery of dry stippled color that makes Watts one of the great technicians and therefore one of the

great artists. And it is surprising with what skill he uses it. Close at hand his pictures seem mere collections of blotches and points of paint of unrelated tints; but if you step back far enough to see the picture as a whole, all is melted into harmony. The harmony is a little hard and glittering, and lacks the voluptuous softness of Venetian color; but it is very genuine, and admirably suited to express the great and enduring thoughts that Watts committed to the canvas. He is the supreme master in one branch of technic, and this is enough to make him a great artist.

But with Watts technic was not the end to be aimed at, as with Whistler. It was not a form of sensuous music; it was an articulate speech, to be used in the utterance of great thoughts, in the bodying forth of splendid visions of eternal truths.

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